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## Look Before You Leap: Weaving Preservation into Appraisal, Acquisition, Accessioning, and Processing Practices

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## **Look Before You Leap: Weaving Preservation into Appraisal, Acquisition, Accessioning, and Processing Practices**

**Pam Hackbart-Dean and Theresa J. Montgomery**

Often the thrill of adventure and discovery propels archivists to pursue collections. While out in the field, few would pass up the opportunity to acquire an interesting collection that would enhance a repository's holdings or disregard an exciting find such as a love letter from a United States president or a personal diary. Sometimes, however, the excitement of discovery overshadows the daunting task of caring for these collections after they have been acquired. Regardless of the manner in which archival materials are acquired by a repository—whether by law, institutional mandate, purchase, or gift—it is important to evaluate the condition and preservation requirements of potential acquisitions, in addition to archival appraisal factors such as historical significance, legal and evidential values, informational content, and scarcity of other documentation.<sup>1</sup>

Before an institution accepts any collection, it should consider not only its value and significance but also the

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 1993), 102.

potential costs associated with its accessioning, processing, long-term maintenance, and providing future access to the materials. Acquisition costs include packing, transportation, insurance, field survey, cleaning, and stabilization. Processing outlays include staff and supplies to provide the arrangement, description, and holdings maintenance of a collection. Adequate supplies include proper storage containers, such as lignin-free or low lignin boxes and folders, chemically stable plastic or paper enclosures, microspatulas, brushes, and bond paper for preservation photocopying.

Long-term maintenance considerations encompass ongoing monitoring of environmental controls, consistent physical inspection, reformatting, backing up and migrating electronic formats, and/or providing conservation treatment. At the same time, the safety of existing collections and the repository staff must remain a perpetual concern because of the potential of infestation from newly acquired collections.

### *The Acquisition Challenges*

The physical conditions under which collections have been stored will provide many clues to prospective problems that will require attention once the collections are accessioned by the repository. For example, if paper records have been stored for years in an attic, and the seasons are alternately hot and cold with associated shifts in relative humidity, papers may be or may become weak and embrittled. If a collection has been stored in a damp or leak-prone warehouse or basement, the records may be moldy or mildewed as well as somewhat pulpy, and thus again very fragile.<sup>2</sup> A careful assessment of the environmental conditions to which the materials have been subjected will suggest reasonable conclusions regarding their present physical state.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



Furthermore, archivists should also investigate the storage area and containers for evidence of insect, rodent, or fungal infestation. Collections presenting severe problems that will require substantial resources for conservation treatment or duplication should be evaluated against the institution's ability to preserve adequately such materials. Granted, most collections acquired by a repository are in fairly good condition. Some may have strong mold and mildew smells or are just plain dusty. Others are in good physical condition but have little to no order to them when they are received. A variety of materials in different formats and conditions may be stored in boxes that are sent to an institution. This could range from three-dimensional objects to photographs, paper, magnetic media, or oversized documents. Ultimately, the final questions are Can staff members adequately take care of these materials? and Will this donation make a contribution to current holdings while not endangering those materials already housed in the repository? To answer these consequential questions, an institution must review the Society of American Archivists' (SAA) *Code of Ethics for Archivists* and its own mission statement and acquisition policy.

### *Ethics*

The SAA *Code of Ethics for Archivists* includes a section on collecting policies, which reads, "Archivists arrange transfers of records and acquire documentary materials of long-term value in accordance with their institution's purposes, stated policies, and resources.... They cooperate to ensure the preservation of materials in repositories where they will be adequately processed and effectively utilized."<sup>3</sup> It is critical to concentrate on the resources aspect of this statement. David Hooper, State Archivist of Arizona, succinctly states the case, when he says, "A repository

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<sup>3</sup> "Code of Ethics for Archivists," Society of American Archivists, 1992.

ethically cannot acquire materials it cannot care for and make available."<sup>4</sup> The focus for repositories should be on their ability to "care for properly" the collections they plan to acquire.

### *Mission Statement*

A mission statement is the definition of what a repository is and does—its *raison d'être*. Most mission statements include the goals of collecting, preserving, and making available material that documents a specifically defined subject area or the history of an institution or organization. During the accession process, repositories tend to focus on the "collecting" aspect of the mission. Archives collect these materials to preserve them for future generations. Understanding the reasons that make a particular collection significant will assist in rationalizing the preservation decision-making. The mission statement gives an institution purpose, and then it is through the creation and implementation of specific policies that the mission is realized.

### *Policies*

In order to implement its mission, every repository needs a written acquisition policy. It defines more specifically what the archives collects, what the limits of the collection will be, and what types of materials are of particular interest. Basically, the purpose of the acquisition policy is to set down initial guidelines for assessing records offered to a repository.<sup>5</sup>

It is used both as an internal document to inform the

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<sup>4</sup> David H. Hooper, "Manuscript Collections: Initial Procedures and Policies," *American Association for State and Local History Technical Leaflet* (Nashville, TN: AASLH, 1980), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Pederson, *Keeping Archives* (Sydney: Australian Society of Archivists, Inc., 1988), 74.



institution's planning and often as an external document to facilitate work with donors.

The acquisition policy should include a general statement, such as: "The condition and format of accessions, and the ability of the institution to provide adequate storage and access to the accessions, will be considered before acceptance." It might also include: "The (research/collection/monetary) value of the materials will be weighed against the amount of resources needed to preserve them (and make them accessible)."<sup>6</sup>

The policy should also include language concerning space and security of the space. It could state, "The institution shall refuse any materials for which it cannot provide adequate and secure storage facilities." This might include materials such as those requiring special housing (e.g., cold storage for nitrate films and/or colored photographs, cabinets for maps). Artwork and artifacts, such as furniture and machinery, may be more appropriate for a historical home or museum, rather than an archives, if proper storage and care cannot be guaranteed.

There could also be a clause in the policy alerting prospective donors to limit possible exhibition. Exhibitions of archival materials show what a repository collects, preserves, and makes available to patrons, but they also have the potential to educate, communicate, and encourage individuals to study the past.<sup>7</sup> However, "no guarantee of exhibition or other special treatment of materials will be made without assessing the risk of damage to the materials by a conservator or preservation professional." Simply, a repository would not

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<sup>6</sup> Sharla Richards and Tom Clareson, "Preservation and Access" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Southwest Archivists, Lafayette, Louisiana, 29 May 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Gail Farr, *Archives & Manuscripts: Exhibits* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 1980), 8.

guarantee an exhibit until it can be confirmed that the materials would not be harmed through exhibition.

Finally, the policy should anticipate future collections and should attempt to provide contingencies for the accession of computer media/electronic records. "The institution shall not acquire materials requiring the use of equipment it does not own unless materials can be transferred to another format.... The institution shall limit the variety of storage formats accepted. There will be a standard format for the archival master files of all converted records."<sup>8</sup>

Such policy statements may be premature, and an institution might be better served by creating specific data acceptance/maintenance guidelines. As part of a project funded in part by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the Delaware Public Archives has developed "Model Guidelines for Electronic Records." These guidelines are intended to guide agencies toward developing electronic records systems that create records that meet the accepted standards for a variety of criteria, including legally acceptable, audible, and evidential. The purpose of these guidelines is to give agencies some guidance in the development of systems that create electronic records.<sup>9</sup> This type of policy would better serve such a specific area of collecting.

Preservation, therefore, must be seen as integral to every activity in an archival repository, beginning with the mission

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<sup>8</sup> Margaret Hedstrom and Sheon Montgomery, *Digital Preservation Needs and Requirements in RLG Member Institutions* (Mountain View, CA: Research Libraries Group, December 1998), 36.

<sup>9</sup> "Model Guidelines for Electronic Records," Delaware Public Archives, Hall of Records, Dover, DE, 1998; <<http://www.lib.de.us/archives/recman/g-lines.htm>>. A similar project was conducted at the University of Pittsburgh and can be found at <<http://www.sis.pitt.edu/~nhprc/progl.html>>.



statement and policies, to acquiring the collection, and finally, to making the collection available for research.

### *Field Survey*

Ideally, when a repository is offered a collection, the archives staff should have the opportunity to survey the collection prior to bringing it into the building. A repository does not always have the opportunity to see the entire collection before it arrives on the doorstep. It may only have the opportunity to review a fraction of the collection and sometimes nothing at all. Accepting a collection sight unseen is risky business. Before any collection is accepted, the repository should always conduct a field survey. A field survey is the investigation of the collection and its condition. It is important to conduct at least a cursory condition survey at the same time that other appraisal functions are taking place. A careful assessment of the environmental conditions to which the materials have been subjected will suggest reasonable conclusions regarding their present physical state. The format of potential accessions also should be considered during the field survey. Unusual or especially fragile formats, such as glass plate negatives, paintings, or three-dimensional objects, may pose special transportation and storage problems.<sup>10</sup>

Collections presenting severe problems which will require substantial resources for conservation treatment or duplication should be evaluated against the institution's ability to preserve adequately such materials. The format of the records and their physical condition must be evaluated in terms of costs and prospects for long-term preservation. The administrative demands in processing and servicing the

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<sup>10</sup> Ritzenthaler, *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts*, 102.



collection must also be estimated.<sup>11</sup> Further, condition should be weighed against value. Collections of limited or unknown value which are in extremely poor condition should not be accepted if the repository has a choice in the matter. Condition will be largely irrelevant, however, when the collection or item in question has significant historical, artifactual, or associational value. For example, a barely legible state constitution or a newly discovered Ernest Hemingway manuscript will be desirable regardless of condition.

Elizabeth Yakel, author of *Starting an Archives*, concludes, "Materials requiring extensive conservation treatments should not be discarded automatically. Although tempting at times, getting rid of one's sticky, expensive, and time-consuming access and preservation problems during appraisal distorts factual evidence for future generations and does future researchers a great injustice."<sup>12</sup> Because a collection has some preservation problems does not necessarily mean that an institution should not accept it. It is important to survey and appraise the collection before the institution makes a commitment. The repository should consider the ramifications prior to signing the donor agreement or facilitating the transfer of custody.

There are two primary benefits of the field survey, as outlined by NAGARA GRASP (National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators *Guide & Resources for Archival Strategic Preservation Planning*). These are (1) to assure that information is gathered by the most

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<sup>11</sup> Virginia R. Stewart, "A Primer on Manuscript Field Work," in Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch, eds., *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings on Archival Theory and Practice* (Washington, DC: NARA, 1984): 129.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Yakel, *Starting An Archives* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1994), 33.

efficient and economical methods, and (2) to establish clear and consistent information that ensures sound decisions by archivist(s) who appraise, arrange and describe, and address other functional concerns.<sup>13</sup>

It is helpful to use a survey form to gather the information needed to create an inventory (see page 85). It will generally include information on the scope and content of the collection and its estimated size. The surveying archivist should record additional information to aid in packing and moving material and thus decrease the likelihood of damage or loss. Highly valuable or fragile items that may require special handling or security precautions should be noted. It is particularly important to note any evidence of mold or insect infestations, past or present, if known. The archivist should also consider the storage environment: storage fixtures and furniture, environment and risk controls (such as, records on the floor). Format and physical condition of records would include the types, physical condition, container format, physical condition of containers, and relation between the container and the records (such as, 80 percent of boxes underfilled). Finally, another consideration would be the format and physical condition of machine-readable records. This includes type, physical condition (such as, dust), container format (such as, aluminum can used for film storage), physical condition of container (such as, microfilm box made of paper that tested positive for acid content) and relation between container and records (such as, audiotapes loose in box).<sup>14</sup>

Another benefit of a field survey is to determine a collection's preservation and security requirements. It also helps establish project priorities and costs for physical

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<sup>13</sup> NAGARA GRASP: *Guide and Resources for Archival Strategic Preservation Planning* (Albany, NY: NAGARA, 1993), 45.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 46-47.



transfer, conservation treatment of existing problems, arrangement and description, and long-term maintenance (such as, through environmental control).<sup>15</sup> Finally, it allows the repository the opportunity to assess the collection and to determine whether it fits the guidelines of its acquisition and collecting policies.

"If the outcome of the survey of a collection is that it presents too many problems, it is best to decline the materials, even if it has research potential and fits within the institution's collecting policy."<sup>16</sup> Another repository should be contacted to determine if they are interested in the materials. In the *SAA Code of Ethics*, archivists must "cooperate to ensure the preservation of materials in repositories where they will be adequately processed and effectively utilized."<sup>17</sup>

### *Receiving the Records/Isolation*

Once a repository has decided to acquire a collection, it must implement provisions for carefully packing and safely transporting the records. Inspection for biological infestation of incoming acquisitions must be complete before the new accessions are placed in the stacks or records storage areas. The accessioning archivist generally inspects the materials during the 'acquisition' period. Doug Sanders, Book and Paper Conservator at Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC), recommends an acclimation period of approximately two days—depending upon atmospheric conditions—before a collection is accessioned and moved into

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>16</sup> Barbara Floyd, "An Archivist Looks at Preservation," in *Managing Preservation: A Guidebook* (Ohio: State Library of Ohio and the Ohio Preservation Council, 1995): 15.

<sup>17</sup> *The Code of Ethics*, SAA.



## Field Survey Preservation Notes

**Collection:****Donor:****Location:**

Telephone Number:

Nature of collection:

Estimated quantity:

Boxed materials:

Loose papers:

Filing cabinets:

Bound volumes:

Oversize materials:

Framed items:

Artifacts:

Other:

Special formats/condition problems:

DescriptionQuantityLocationSpecial Handling

Water damage:

Evidence of mold:

Evidence of insect infestation:

Packing supplies required:

Equipment required:

Approx. # of packing days:

Personnel required:

Transportation required:

Additional comments:

Archivist \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Form developed by Pam Hackbart-Dean for the Richard B. Russell  
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the stacks.<sup>18</sup> This will provide time to inspect the collection to ascertain a pest or mold infestation problem.

Ideally, there should be a specially designed space adjacent to the loading dock and new acquisitions/accession area for the acclimation. It should be a secure place available to store incoming collections while they are awaiting integration into the archival accessioning/processing procedures. During the initial field survey and packing, the archivist should note any evidence of mold or insect infestation. All incoming collections in which there is evidence of infestation must be kept isolated in a secure area while fumigation options are explored, in order to avoid contaminating the entire holdings.<sup>19</sup> The archivist should also check the transfer to ensure that all materials are accounted for per transfer documentation.

### *Accessioning and Processing*

Accessioning is the formal acceptance into custody of an acquisition and the recording of that acceptance. Once accessioning procedures have been carried out, the staff should discard potentially damaging packing materials. Then, once processing has begun, archivists use holdings maintenance procedures to transfer newly acquired collections into chemically stable, good preservation quality archival enclosures.

The primary goal of archival preservation is to provide a basic level of preservation for all holdings. Whatever decisions are made, the repository should consider the limitations on institutional resources, including funding,

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<sup>18</sup> Doug Sanders, telephone conversation with Theresa Montgomery, 21 August 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Fumigation issues and procedures are outlined in Ritzenthaler, *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts*, chapter 10.

staffing, and competing programs. At the same time, archives are experiencing increasing demands for access. This translates into a situation where a decision to preserve one collection means that another collection may not receive adequate preservation attention.<sup>20</sup> With finite resources and increased use, collections may also receive limited preservation attention before being made available for research.

Processing archivists also need to know, especially in the absence of a conservator, about the physical nature of archival materials in all formats, the causes of deterioration, the methods of preventing deterioration, and the methods of reversing existing deterioration. To accomplish the last two objectives, archivists should also have some familiarity with basic conservation treatments and techniques or preservation practices. Storage and housing can be improved at various stages during the life cycle of records but are often incorporated into accessioning or arrangement projects.<sup>21</sup>

If preservation were the only concern, fasteners would be eliminated entirely from the archival repertoire of supplies. But in this as in other areas, sound preservation practice must be meshed with other valid archival concerns regarding security, handling, and the need to maintain records in their original order.<sup>22</sup> Archivists may be the best persons to handle the removal or separation of foreign objects from collections, including damaging metal fasteners of various

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<sup>20</sup> Tyler O. Walters, "Contemporary Archival Appraisal Methods and Preservation Decision-Making," *American Archivist* 59 (1996): 323.

<sup>21</sup> Norvell M. Jones and Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, "Implementing an Archival Preservation Program," in James Gregory Bradsher, ed., *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988): 200.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.



types, rubber bands, artifacts such as court evidence (locks of hairs, bullets, and so on), or three-dimensional objects. The archivist can cross-reference and rehouse these materials with advice or assistance from a trained conservator. Institutional policies may vary regarding the best way to handle these extraneous but associated materials.

### *Environmental Examination*

Maintaining a stable environment once the material is in the repository is critical to the longevity of archival materials. Sometimes a problem may develop after custody of the collection has been transferred. Oftentimes, however, there is an existing problem into which new materials are transferred. This must be taken into consideration when determining whether to accept a collection. In this case, an ongoing environmental monitoring program would prove invaluable. The monitoring efforts would provide support documentation to solicit funding, if needed, to correct the deficiencies. The staff should continually monitor records in the processing and storage areas for evidence of pests, leaks, air quality, and fluctuations in the temperature and relative humidity. Staff education and consistent communication is imperative for the success of all preservation efforts.

### *Preventive Measures*

Among some of the issues the archivist needs to address when attempting to prevent future damage to the collections are pest control, cleaning practices, and dampness. The use of glueboards or sticky traps in records storage areas and exhibition areas can help make inspection and identification of inhouse problems easier. It is simpler to inspect the traps than to inspect each object, for example, and sticky traps provide an inventory of species present. Good sources for

insect identification are *A Guide to Museum Pest Control*,<sup>23</sup> an entomologist, an exterminator, or the state cooperative extension service. Good housekeeping for pest control includes more than inspection of collections, vacuuming (not sweeping), and damp mopping of all interior spaces, including attics and basements. All entry points such as doors, air intakes, air conditioning units, and openings for utilities should be sealed as well as possible, periodically inspected, and cleaned as necessary. Food policies should be carefully monitored. Food should not be allowed in or near records storage/processing areas.<sup>24</sup>

An Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program relies on the early detection of insect pests, preferably before they become established and cause damage. The emphasis is on preventive methods, and the use of chemicals as a last resort. One staff member, usually the conservator or head of preservation, serves as coordinator and liaison with the exterminator, other experts, and the repository staff. This person can also be responsible for expressing concerns about pest control when formulating collection policies and when planning for a new building, renovations, or exhibitions. The IPM coordinator is charged with keeping up with new information, health hazards, and legal restrictions related to pesticides. Limited use of chemicals is the safest way to monitor collections and prevent possible harm to collections, personnel, and the environment.

Dust is everywhere, so good housekeeping is vital to good preservation practice. Dampness can cause water damage, and unnoticed leaks can produce infestations like mold or

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<sup>23</sup> Lynda Zycherman, ed., *A Guide to Museum Pest Control* (Washington, DC: Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation and Historic and Artistic Works, 1988).

<sup>24</sup> Of some concern at many repositories are new services, such as facility rental, which introduce new problems.



pests in rotting wood or plaster. A good source for mold infestation identification would be a university mycologist. It may be more difficult to determine the type of mold, especially if it is dormant.

### *Contacts*

An institution may not have the onsite resources to investigate various solutions when confronted with accepting a problem collection. There are sources, organizations, and individuals available to help. They can answer questions, send information, or put an individual or repositories in touch with appropriate resources. Such contacts might include the preservation field office of the Regional Alliance for Preservation (members include Southeastern Library Network, AMIGOS, Northeast Document Conservation Center, Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts, and the Upper Midwest Conservation Association), the state archives, or a preservation department at a university or college. If they do not know the answer, they will lead to someone who might. It will take time to investigate possible solutions, but it is worth the effort.

### *Summary*

Preservation is an institution-wide responsibility. Because of the nature and size of many archives, there may be only one professional staff member administering the overall archival operation as well as management of preservation activities. This person must be able to make informed decisions about the program based on an understanding of the mission and collecting policies, the conditions of the collections as a whole and records scheduled to come in, the facilities in which they are housed, the needs of the archives' users, the resources required to support the program, and the options available for preserving both original records and reformatted records.



A repository should know that it is providing the best possible care for a collection when acquired. It is part of the mission and duty of an archives to collect, preserve, and make materials available for research. Preservation should be integrated in all archival functions such as appraisal, accessioning, arrangement and description, storage and housing, reference use, and exhibition. This must be seen as an inherent part of all archival work rather than a series of specialized activities limited to one day per week. Ultimately, repositories want to be assured that their staff members are doing all they can to preserve a collection that they accept into their holdings—that they have looked before they leaped!

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